

## OPINION

## With COVID-19, Canada is paying the price for being complacent

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“COVID is beating us,” Manitoba Premier Brian Pallister said Monday. But he’s wrong: We are letting the virus beat us with our complacency and half-measures.

Manitoba is a striking example of the price that is to be paid for smugness.

Like all provinces, it took the threat seriously when COVID-19 started to hit Canada in March, but cases climbed (owing mostly to travellers) and peaked in late April.

By mid-July, Manitoba was a poster child for how to control the pandemic. It had gone two weeks without a single new case and Mr. Pallister all but declared victory, lifting most restrictions and declaring the province open for business.

One hundred days later, Manitoba has the worst outbreak in the country. On Friday alone, it recorded 480 cases. (That’s roughly half the number of Ontario, a province with 10 times the population.)

In the provincial capital, Winnipeg, the test positivity rate is 9.8 per cent – meaning one in every 10 people who are tested are infected with coronavirus – one of the highest rates in the world.

So what happened?

Manitoba let down its guard – to the point where it closed its COVID-19 command centre. (It reopened Monday.)

Then cases started popping up again. There was an outbreak at a pork processing plant in Brandon, and others in Hutterite communities. Then cases related to bars and family gatherings.

In the eight months since the virus took root in Canada, the way it spreads has become predictable: Superspreader events and stealth-like community spread that combine to see numbers creep up slowly, then surge.

Within two weeks, Manitoba went from 50 cases daily to 500, the bulk of them in Winnipeg. Thanksgiving weekend carelessness seems to have hit even harder than elsewhere.

Now the province is scrambling to contain a disaster. Code red was instituted in the capital – bars closed, gatherings limited, the importance of mask-wearing reiterated – and the Premier is even mulling a curfew to go along with the lockdown.

But these are all things that should have been done earlier. If there is one lesson we can learn from countries that have weathered the pandemic best, it is this: Shut down swiftly, and reopen cautiously.

That should be our mantra. Yet, time and time again in Canada, we do the opposite. We shut down slowly and reopen prematurely. When cases climb, we watch and fret instead of bringing the hammer down.

And the coronavirus exploits our mistakes, with wave after wave of infections.

Of course, Manitoba is not alone in embracing half-measures and suffering the consequences.

The numbers in Alberta continue to be worrisome and the provincial government seems to have no intention to respond pro-actively.

What's happening in Ontario and Quebec is equally concerning. Cases are no longer surging, but they're not falling either. Rather, central Canada has seemingly settled into a holding pattern of about 2,000 new cases a day.

What's even more unsettling is the 20,000 or so active cases in Ontario and Quebec combined. As long as you have tens of thousands of infected people out there, you are never going to be able to safely reopen the economy.

The only way to break chains of transmission is to impose restrictions on social life and business until you snuff out the virus.

Yet, Ontario is set to lift rather than tighten restrictions.

Everyone is getting tired of this godforsaken coronavirus. There has been a lot of sacrifice, personal and economic, and it hasn't been evenly distributed.

But pretending, in Trump-like fashion, that the coronavirus will simply disappear, is foolhardy.

There are many cautionary tales out there and none more so than Belgium. In late September, the country of 11 million had about 500 new cases daily. By the end of October, it hit 20,000 a day.

How did things go south so quickly?

Essentially, by not taking the coronavirus seriously enough. The yearning for normalcy had people rushing back out to cafés, to work and to visit family, all with predictable results.

What's happening in Belgium is also unfolding in France, Britain, Spain and elsewhere. As a result, these countries are imposing lockdowns that are even stricter than during the first wave back in the spring.

The advantage we have in Canada is that we can look to their experiences and learn.

Or we can continue with our complacency and pay a heavy price.

Countries around the world are working on a coronavirus vaccine, including right here in Canada. Globe and Mail science reporter Ivan Semeniuk discussed the timeline and challenges in developing COVID-19 vaccines during a Facebook live.

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